

# Steps

## ECMap Newsletter



Early Child Development Mapping Project

Early Winter – November 2011

## 60 communities and growing

### Director's message

For a relatively short time now we have been working on realizing the dream of creating the first picture of preschool child development in Alberta. In less than two years — thanks to kindergarten teachers — we have received and begun analyzing about 25,000 Early Development Instrument (EDI) questionnaires provided to us by Alberta Education. About 15,000 more will arrive in the next month.

More than 60 community boundaries have been identified by local early childhood development (ECD) coalitions with the help of ECMap community development coordinators. More than 35 of these coalitions have received seed grants to plan ECD development in their communities.

Where EDI data is available, communities have received Community Information Packages (CIPs) with EDI results for their communities and subcommunities.

What next? We expect to have the first waves of EDI analysis completed for all but a few communities in early 2012. CIPs will be developed for all communities that are ready to receive them during the upcoming year. We will also launch our new website, which will include maps and information on the progress of preschool children in Alberta. Our website will keep Albertans informed about the wonderful activities that communities are implementing to support their young children and families.



Sue Lynch, ECMap director

ECMap will assist community coalitions to connect across the province and share ideas and processes. The Project team will start analyzing the second round of EDI data and will continue to research the factors that appear to influence early childhood outcomes in the province. As research results become available, they will be shared with communities, organizations and levels of government in Alberta.

With everyone working together, we've come a long way in 24 months. Well done and thanks to you all. Together we can make a difference.



Members of the Hanna ECD Community coalition check their first community results in October.

### New website

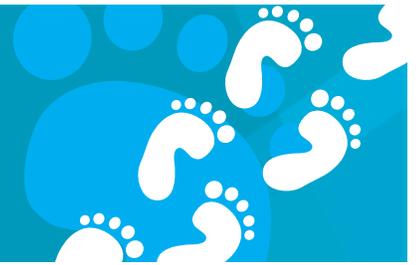
Watch for our website launch by checking our homepage at [www.ecmap.ca](http://www.ecmap.ca)

### we engage

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# Early childhood development



## The power of play: 6 things you should know



Photo: Ed Kaiser

*Play is becoming an endangered activity.*

*And that's not a good thing for our young children.*

Play is absolutely essential to early development. Yet we persistently undervalue it and allow our kids fewer and fewer opportunities for the uninterrupted spontaneous free play that they need.

Early childhood development (ECD) experts are sounding the alarm bells about what they see as a serious undervaluation of play. Among them is Dr. Jane Hewes, chair of the Early Learning and Child Care program at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton.

Play is absolutely essential to children's development, says Dr. Hewes. "A large body of research supports this. Play is so important that it is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our public attitudes, policies and programs not only fail to recognize this, but they are eroding our children's opportunities to play."

How did this happen?



Jane Hewes

Advances in neuroscience increased public awareness of the importance of early experience, says Dr. Hewes. Growing public concern about children's "readiness for school" also put a new focus on the early acquisition of

academic skills and the direct teaching of numeracy and literacy in early education programs. Studies show that this approach does not bring long-term benefits. It can in fact have a negative impact on children's confidence in themselves as learners.

The overscheduling of children's lives has also undermined play, says Dr. Hewes. With both parents working in most families, young children now spend their days in structured care and education settings. Their recreational activities — indoor and outdoor — are also carefully constructed and monitored. Parents worry more about the safety of their children. These

concerns have dramatically altered children's play spaces, as has technology and changing urban environments.

What this all adds up to is a lot less time for "free" play, directed and controlled by children. Recent neuroscientific research confirms that there are significant benefits from spontaneous free play, however.

What can parents and other adults do? Dr. Hewes offers a number of suggestions:

1. Recognize the importance of play. Play is integral to every aspect of development and lays the foundation for formal learning and success in school. It underlies everything from motor development to social competence, emotional self-control, confidence, creativity, scientific reasoning and abstract thinking. Child's play is a serious business.
2. Understand that play is much more than running around outdoors. There are many forms of play. Sometimes play doesn't look like play. It can be complex and subtle. Experts define play as: controlled by the child, actively engaging, voluntary and intrinsically motivated.
3. Provide children with uninterrupted time (at least 45-60 minutes at a time) and rich, nurturing environments that stimulate exploration and discovery.
4. Facilitate play by taking an interest in it, carefully observing it and offering guidance and suggestions when play becomes frustrating or is about to be abandoned because children lack the skills or knowledge to continue. But don't take over.
5. Offer "emergent" curriculum in child care and early education programs. The curriculum should emerge from the child, focus on play and allow children to build their own understanding.
6. Slow down and stay in the present moment. Adults tend to live in the future. Play takes place in the present. Children live in the present. That's one of their gifts to adults.

For more information, download Dr. Hewes' article, *Let the Children Play: Nature's Answer to Early Learning*, [http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ECLKC/lessons/Originalversion\\_LessonsinLearning.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ECLKC/lessons/Originalversion_LessonsinLearning.pdf)

# Community coalitions



## Community developers organize in B.C.

Early years community developers have established their first professional organization in B.C.

EYCDs, as they are known in B.C., have decided they needed to raise their public profile. On October 27, they launched the Early Years Community Development Institute and a new website. The website will serve as a focal point for the institute, which represents EYCDs from about 105 early childhood development (ECD) coalitions throughout the province.

“It became obvious that their role needed to be explained, because of the lack of awareness of who they are and what they do,” says Joanne Schroeder, deputy director of the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) and one of the driving forces behind the institute.

Developers serve as a linchpin in communities, bringing together the various players involved in early development, from parents to educators, service providers and policy-makers, says Schroeder.

“Developers bring the different partners together. This is essential in an early years system that is fragmented like the one we have in B.C. The system cannot work effectively if you don’t have strong partnerships.”

The institute will provide professional development, peer mentorship and networking opportunities for developers who are required to have a broad set of skills and who often work in isolation. Developers need a solid background in early childhood development. They have to understand the science and be able to explain it simply. They also have to be skilled community developers — be able to work collaboratively, motivate people and build community capacity.

Their work is relatively new, however, and no professional training or standards have been developed yet, says Schroeder. Local job

***The work of early years community developers is relatively new and no professional training or standards have been developed yet, says Joanne Schroeder, deputy director of B.C.’s Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP).***



Joanne Schroeder addresses HELP’s annual fall conference in Vancouver.

descriptions — and expectations — can vary tremendously. “They end up doing everything from stapling reports and baking cupcakes for meetings to developing strategic plans and meeting with high-level policy-makers.”

The institute wants to establish professional standards for the job and develop a coherent provincial approach and capable leadership. This will help to build strong functioning coalitions across B.C., says Schroeder. HELP’s research has shown that there is a direct relationship between early child vulnerability and the strength of local ECD coalitions. Evidence has linked the reduction of child vulnerability in B.C. communities to strong effective coalitions.

EYCDI was launched during HELP’s annual fall research conference in Vancouver. The conference marked the 10th anniversary of HELP, which collects and maps ECD data in B.C.

B.C. was the first province in Canada to analyze and map early childhood development results across the whole province. It was also the first province to encourage communities to organize ECD coalitions.

The institute aims to reach out to community developers in other provinces, including Alberta. “We’d like to see what common themes and interests emerge,” says Schroeder.

### Contact EYCDI

Find out more about the institute and its activities, including professional development webinars at [www.eycdi.ca](http://www.eycdi.ca).

**Note:** In Alberta, community developers hired by coalitions are known as early childhood development (ECD) coalition coordinators.

# Profiles

## On the road



Donna Cushman, Zone 2 community development coordinator, works out of her office on wheels.

### *Donna Cushman takes a wide-angle lens approach to her work as Zone 2 community development coordinator.*

“It helps to keep the bigger picture in mind,” says Cushman, whose territory encompasses the rolling steppes of southeastern Alberta.

Her zone runs from Highway 23 east to Saskatchewan and south of Highway 1 to the U.S. border. The area is carved into large farms and sprawling ranches and dotted with villages and hamlets.

Medicine Hat, which has about 62,000 people, is the largest city. The population can be diverse, from Low German Mennonites to the more than 2,000 immigrants and refugees who work in the meat packing plant in Brooks.

The large distances and sparse population present their own dilemmas. “Communities face many challenges when they’re small and far removed from larger centres,” observes Cushman. “People may have to drive two hours to access services.”

Cushman spends an average of three days a week on the road, taking her ‘office on wheels’ wherever she goes. Her materials are neatly stacked in plastic file totes, along with her laptop and projector. Meetings are held

wherever it’s most convenient, including the local Tim Hortons.

Winter driving conditions can be brutal, Cushman says. This impacts attendance at coalition meetings. She is trying to connect coalition members through video conferencing services offered by some local libraries.

Ten coalitions are currently working with early childhood development communities in her zone. Three communities — Lethbridge County, Medicine Hat and MD Taber - Warner County South — have already received their first Community Information Packages. The packages contain the first round of community results on early development, socio-economic status and local assets.

“The response has been very positive,” says Cushman. “As soon as people get the information, they see how they can become involved and want to come to the table.”

Cushman, who lives in Lethbridge, has worked in early childhood development since 1993. She aims to complete her master’s degree in education in two years. Between her work and studies, she still manages to find time to enjoy her first grandchild Evander, 17 months old.

*Donna Cushman can be reached at 403-330-9703 or [dcushman@ualberta.ca](mailto:dcushman@ualberta.ca).*

## Links

Videos on brain development

The Norlien Foundation’s Alberta Family Wellness Initiative has produced a number of informative, easy-to-understand videos on different aspects of brain development.

The 2010 *Early Brain and Biological Development Symposium* (about 27 min.) highlights key presentations made during the foundation’s 2010 symposium. It is divided into eight chapters, which include interviews with early childhood development experts. A print summary report is also available <http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/search>

*The Frameworks of Early Brain Development* covers four topics in-depth (60 min. each). <http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/learning-module/frameworks-early-brain-development>

## Contact us

The Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) is part of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative, which is funded by Alberta Education. ECMap is led by the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (CUP), Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta.

For further information, please go to [www.ecmap.ca](http://www.ecmap.ca)

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*Mapping a bright future for Alberta’s young children*